

Parashat BeHa'alotcha: The Connecting Fabric of it All

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Parashat BeHa'alotcha, which is the third parasha in Bamidbar, illuminates the concealed unity that unifies all of existence. Our human eyes see many people, objects, places, etc. But at the core of it all, teaches the parasha, all is one. Everything is Divine.

How can this hidden quality be discovered? How can we reduce what appears as multiplicity to unseen Oneness? For those seeking hints for unity, this parasha is full of them.

At the beginning of the parasha Aharon is commanded to have the fire lit on the seven-branched menorah. The observer will first see seven distinct flames. And then he will see seven candles, each standing on its own base. And then, as his gaze wanders down the beautiful, elaborate ornamentation made of solid gold, he will realize that it is made of one single piece. The Torah states clearly and uncharacteristically that it was made **"According to the pattern that the LORD had shown Moses..."** (Bamidbar 8: 4)

Later in the parasha we receive a second hint. The Cloud of Presence has risen, it now hovers above the Mishkan, and all who see it understand it to be the sign that it is time to fold up their year-long encampment and the newly-inaugurated Ohel Mo'ed at the base of Mount Sinai, and continue on their journey to the Promised Land. Two million people, their livestock and their belongings... what chaos! Yet, viewed from above, the encampment was incredibly organized in the form of ONE giant square with three tribes on each side and an inner square of the three Levite families and the priests, carrying the Tabernacle. This shape will hold for the entire 39 years of wandering, and this is also the form it will maintain each time they set up an encampment.

Contrary to the solid, seven-branched menorah, no one, single, connecting base of the camp is evident, yet it does exist on several levels. On the first level, the shape itself indicates inner cohesion. It is similar to a human organism which is made up of myriad cells, each with its own unique qualities which are maintained in motion or at ease. When a cell breaks out of this precise system and multiplies or functions on its own, we sometimes call it cancerous.

On the second level, just like a human being, the encampment of Bnei Yisrael has a heart which pumps the flow of life and vitality throughout the camp: the Mishkan. In it, God's presence dwells. Each tribe is encamped the exact same distance from this heart and its life-enhancing vitality.

A third hint of oneness may be found in the way in which the parasha describes the method of movement in the desert:

"The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Have two silver trumpets made; make them of hammered work. They shall serve you to summon the community and to set the divisions in motion. When both are blown in long blasts, the whole community shall assemble before you at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting; and if only one is blown, the chieftains, heads of Israel's contingents, shall assemble before you. But when you sound short blasts, the divisions encamped on the east shall move forward; and when you sound short blasts a second time, those encamped on the south shall move forward. Thus short blasts shall be blown for setting them in motion, while to convoke the congregation you shall blow long blasts, not short ones. The trumpets shall be blown by Aaron's sons, the priests; they shall be for you an institution for all time throughout the ages. When you are at war in your land against an aggressor who attacks you, you shall sound short blasts on the trumpets, that you may be remembered before the LORD your God and be delivered from your enemies. And on your joyous occasions—your fixed festivals and new moon days—you shall sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being. They shall be a reminder of you before your God: I, the LORD, am your God." (Bamidbar 10: 1-10)

Two trumpets are used to create a common language, a language which unifies all twelve tribes. One trumpet's blast calls the heads of the tribes to gather in front of Ohel Mo'ed, the tent which unifies all of the people and their respective tribes. Two long blasts call everyone to assemble there, and two short blasts signify the beginning of movement, starting from the southern flank. The trumpets will also be blasted in times of war, on festivals, and on the new moon. All of these blasts form the memory of the Divine, the hidden connection between all that appears separate on the surface. They create a powerful communication between every organism which retains the memory of unity.

We, too (at least most of us), put aside our differences when we hear the siren on our memorial days, as if a hidden hand connects our hearts for a short span of time. So, too, when the siren calls us to war – separateness disappears and we join together in unison, fighting for our survival.

Up until this point in the parasha all is ideal and uplifting: the analogy of the menorah, the organized camp, and the silver trumpets. But then the ideal is shattered, because "happily ever after" is not the way of the Torah. As the excited nation begins to move forward on its journey, reality strikes with full force. This is often the case after a dramatic spiritual experience.

"The people took to complaining bitterly before the LORD... The riffraff in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then the Israelites wept and said, "If only we

had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled..." (Bamidbar 11: 1-5)

Gluttony and hunger always surface from the part within us that is not connected to life-giving vitality. Hunger comes from the parts within us that are disconnected from the great unity. In this parasha, the Torah calls this part "riffraff". But complaining is contagious. When the "riffraff" begin to complain, the rest of the Israelites join them, and the harmonious unity is shattered.

This is a very difficult experience - falling from the "high" of Oneness to the depths of separateness. The experience of separateness is always one of hunger and pain.

At this point Moshe gives up. He cannot bear the weight of responsibility for the People any longer. It was much easier to carry the People when they were unified and attentive. But when unity disintegrates, the pieces become very heavy. We are all familiar with this experience: when life flows harmoniously, no burden is felt; when it is disrupted, it becomes much harder to bear.

And then a miraculous thing happens. We are given an exceptional mechanism for attaining unity once again. God shares - splits - His light of wisdom with 70 elders, to help Moshe carry the burden. Instead of one individual - Moshe - carrying all the answers, the unity, and the vitality for the entire camp, 70 additional people are empowered to carry the Divine light, thereby strengthening the huge Israelite fabric.

The seven flames of the Menorah, and the seventy elders carrying the Divine light, are both a wonderful metaphor for the way the One appears as many, yet remains One - one source, one Light. The seven flames and the seventy prophets carry and project God's pulsating - albeit concealed - vitality throughout the world.

Back for a moment to the lighting of the Menorah. Notice that there is no flint or match. **"The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and say to him, "When you raise the lights, let the seven lamps give light at the front of the lampstand." Aaron did so;"** (Bamidbar 8: 1-3) Aharon does not light the candles, he raises them! He raises the light from the depths, from the base, from the life force which pulsates through all of Creation. Furthermore, it is as if Aharon is being asked to raise the lights from within himself, and from that light the seven lamps are lit.

We are all familiar with the kind of light that enables us to see in the dark. But the light we are introduced to here is different. It enables us to see the continuum of existence. The light that shows us that everything is connected; that all of the separate parts of existence draw sustenance from the source, from the well of life-giving unity.

The seven-branched menorah is THE Jewish symbol (no, not the Star of David!!) which, together with the shofar (another very Jewish symbol), reminds us to look deeply and listen closely, because beneath the surface, under what seems like separateness, ruffraff, complexity, divisiveness, and diversity, there lies a radical unity which holds it all together.

It is from this unity that we draw sustenance.

This evening we will light two Shabbat candles – one for "Zachor" (remember), and one for "Shamor" (observe). Just like the menorah, the Shabbat candles remind us that our human eyes will always see separateness and multiplicity. This is how we are. But our task is to look deeper and seek the hidden fabric that connects people, organisms, Jews and non-Jews, black and white.

This is where the vitality that gives life to everything may be found.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha